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THE COSSACK BANDITS OF THE CROW'S NEST

By

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Hot as an over blast the July wind swept across the Montana prairies, sending the three cowboy-hatted Cossacks to seek the shade of the chuck wagon while the herd of black-faced sheep bleated restlessly about.

"I'm telling you it'll be easy," insisted the gorilla-like Russian with the drooping moustache and pock-marked face. "This Emperor Pic carries a wad that would choke an ox when he goes to the Crow's Nest Pass for his weekly load of bootleg hootch. It would be easy to lay him out and grab the money."

Fed up with the monotony of sheep herding, Tom Bassoff, the speaker, and his companion, Ackroff, had been jolted out of their humdrum existence by the visit of the hawk-eyed and dynamic Alex Auloff from the roistering mining town of Butte. Imbued with the swashbuckling urge bequeathed them by a long line of hard-fighting Cossack ancestors, their minds had turned to a more adventurous way of making money.

"I'm with you," Ackroff nodded his shaggy head. "I'm sick of playing nursemaid to these bleating wool factories....."

Ackroff brushed back his tawny mane of yellow hair. "I'll slip down to Grand Falls and get the guns and stuff. You beat it across the border to Lethbridge, find out when Pickerello will make his next trip and I'll be there."

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On the sultry afternoon of August 2nd, 1920, passengers aboard Canadian Pacific Train No. 63 lolled in their seats.

"Sentinel... Sentinel Siding!" Brakeman James T. Hickie swung down the aisle in the wake of Conductor Sam Jones. "Senti....."

The staccato report of an automatic, the splintering crash of bullets and the harsh command "Hands up!" froze the word on his lips. In a split second the quiet coach was transformed into a tumult of barking guns, screaming women and cursing men, their frightened eyes fixed on the three armed foreigners who were herding the astonished train crew towards the rear.

While Auloff prodded the train crew down the corridor, and Ackroff covered the cringing passengers with his automatics, Basoff pawed through their clothes; transferring cash, jewellry and trinkets to the capacious pockets of his mackinaw.

"Your money - quick!" Auloff prodded Conductor Jones to the rear platform with his Mauser. Swiftly his hairy paw relieved him of money, watch and valuables. Under the threatening muzzle of the Cossack's gun, Brakeman Hickie yanked a well-filled purse from his hip pocket and handed it across. Baggageman Joe Staples' empty pockets evoked an angry growl of disappointment.

"Make it go... the train!" snarled Auloff. Obediently Jones pulled the cord. Vaulting to the ties as the train gathered speed, the bandits sent a splintering barrage into the rear and disappeared into the protecting shadow of the forest.

The plans of the three Cossacks had miscarried. Meeting at Lethbridge they had shadowed Emperor Pic to the bank, seen him withdraw a large sum that morning, and followed him around. But the wily Emperor Pic had smelled a rat and slipped from the rear of the train ten miles from his destination. Determined to secure

some spoils they then decided to hold up the train. Their reward was but a paltry four hundred dollars, and a handful of useless jewellry and trinkets.

As news of the daring hold-up was flashed over the wires from Fernie squads of heavily armed Mounted Police and Provincials under Superintendent Pennyfather and Commissioner Bryan raced to throw a cordon around the scene of the robbery, and block all exits from the Pass. Upon the excited mining towns of Blairmore, Bellevue, Frank and Crow's Nest descended more squads of scarlet-coated Mounties, while detectives and blue-uniformed Railway police searched every train and string of clattering box-cars. Scarlet dodgers, offering a reward, appeared in every store, pool-room and post office. Yet five days slipped by without a sign of the wanted men.

Gazing through the windows of his office on Bellevue's Main Street Joe Robertson observed a couple of foreigners ambling down the sidewalk. Stopping to read the reward notice in the window they laughed, and disappeared into the Bellevue Cafe next door.

"Quick!" Robertson shouted to Constable Frewen over the phone, "Two foreigners just went into the Chink's next door. They look like two of those bandits."

Provincial Constable William Bailey had just finished buckling on his side arms when Corporal Usher of the Mounted Police burst in. Hurriedly Frewen also slipped a .28 Wesson and a .32 automatic into the pocket of his civvies and the three hit out for the cafe.

"Better watch your step," Justice Robertson warned. "those birds look like tough hombres to me."

"Cover the back door," Frewen told Bailey as they approached the unpainted cafe. "I'll slip in and give them the once-over, They won't suspect me in civvies."

Through the fly-specked window Usher watched him saunter past the booths and purchase cigarettes. He was pale when he emerged.

"Booth Four," he whispered hoarsely. "Take the man on the left - I'll handle the other."

Grasping the butt of his .32 Frewen eased cautiously past the empty booths. "Hands up!" His gun leapt into the face of the amazed Ackroff. As Usher covered Bassoff with his Colf, Ackroff's hands dropped to the coat beside him.

"Hands up!" snapped Frewen.

From the folds of the Russian's coat emerged the wicked snout of a Mauser. A deafening detonation rocked the restaurant. Bounding forward like an ape, Bassoff's hairy hand caught Usher's gun wrist in a vice-like grip. Together they crashed about the booth, the Mountie's blazing Colt splintering floor and walls as the Cossackeexerted her herculean strength to turn the gun against him. A bullet ripped through Bassoff's leg, causing him to draw back his lips in a ferocious yell. From the melee of struggling, shouting men; of crashing bodies and splintering glass, emerged Frewen, dazed - his revolver smoking. "Shoot.. for God's sake shoot!" he yelled to Bailey as another blast of gunfire rocked the cafe.

Fighting furiously, Bailey and Usher started to back out when Usher emitted a cry, caught at the door-jamb and pitched across the threshold. Still blazing away Constable Bailey recoiled, swayed,

and sprawled over the prostrate Mountie.

Lurching across the fallen officers, a smoking Mauser in his hand, Ackroff supported himself against the wall and staggered blindly down the street.

Bellowing like an infuriated bull, Bassoff loomed in the doorway. Attempting to crawl, Bailey met the Cossack's malign gaze. The bandit's revolver exploded in his face and he crumpled on the sidewalk. Lurching to his elbow, Usher, too, sank beneath a fusilade of bullets. Like a madman, Bassoff turned his smoking gun on the sheriff, whipping his sombrero from his head.

Still shooting from behind a telephone pole scarred with the Coasack's bullets, Robertson saw Bassoff leap to the side of his wounded partner and end his torment with two well placed bullets. Then, with a defiant shriek he bounded, with the agility of a mountain goat, from rock to rock till lost to sight.

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Dazed by the sanguinary battle which, in a few awful moments had turned the sleepy cafe into a blazing inferno and blasted the lives from his two jovial fellow officers, Frewen ran from store to store calling for volunteers to run down the fleeing bandit and avenge the killings.

While the posse of grim-faced men canvassed the town for weapons the bodies of the victims were carried into the sheriff's office.

As throbbing telegraph wires spread the story of the desperate gun battle in the mountain town angry miners and settlers stormed the dimunitive Mounted Police barracks, armed with a strange assortment of weapons, all anxious for vengeance.

While posses helped patrol the mountains and tighten the cordon, others combed the valleys and canyons in search of Auloff, third member of the bandit trio. The finding of a solitary dollar on Ackroff's body, and the discovery that Bassoff had tried to cash a cheque at Coleman two days after the hold-up, pointed to a quarrel over the division of the spoils, and of Auloff having double-crossed his companions and gotten away with the booty.

The first grey streaks of dawn were breaking over the rock-walled town of Bellevue when J. D. Nicholson of the Alberta Provincial Police arrived to take charge of the chase. Descending from a caboose he found the picturesque frontier town alive with Mounties and Provincials.

All night, as though weeping over the untimely fate of the two slain officers, the skies unleashed their furies upon the posses in a torrential downpour accompanied by a thundering artillery which reverberated among the rugged mountains and split the darkness with flashes of blinding flame. Tired, worn, and soaked to the skin they trooped in to snatch a few hours sleep while others took up the chase.

It was noon when Nicholson received his first break. Chapping the jangling telephone to his ear he emitted an excited "Ah!" From her lonely ranch two miles away came the terror-stricken voice of Mrs. Halloway. "I've seen him," she cried, "the big Russian. He stopped here and made me feed him. Threatened me with the biggest revolver I ever saw, and said he'd come back and kill me if I talked."

Quickly Nick rounded up a squad of armed men. Squelching, knee-deep, through palpitating muskeg they reached the log-walled ranch to find the old lady still pale and trambling. "He must be

in the bush somewhere," she cried. "He's wounded, and has to hobble on a stick."

Hardly had Nick swung a tightening cordon around the ranch than from Crow's Nest, sixteen miles to the westward, came word that the third bandit, Auloff, had been seen. John Gregory had been making a short cut through the bush when he found himself lookinginto the muzzle of a rifle. Squatted, cross-legged, at the foot of a pine tree a granite-faced man with ice-blue eyes shadowed by a black sombrero surveyed him over the sights with a gruff demand for matches.

"When I stepped over to give 'em to him," Gregory reported, "he told me to throw 'em on the ground and to walk straight ahead and not look back unless I wanted a bullet in my spine."

"How was he dressed?" Nick demanded.

"In a black sombrero and a black mackinaw coat with white belt."

"That's Auloff, I'll bet," Nick snapped, giving swift orders to surround the spot.

Two hours later Old Baptiste, a trapper, dashed in, demanding to speak to "the head boss of the Police".

"I'm foller dat trail what Gregory took, I'm hear a sound like someone tap his pipe against a tree. Den," admitted the trapper, "I'm trabble lak hell.... I'm look neither one way nor t'other. I'm sure it was that diable bandit!"

Then from Gateway, near the International boundary, came word that Brakeman Lewis had been held up at the point of a revolver as he attempted to eject a burly transient from a box-car.

Snatching up the telephone, Nick got Corporal Wilson at Fernie on the line. "Take all the men you've got," he ordered, "[illegible]

and high-tail it to Gateway with Brakeman Hall. Make it snappy or that bird'll get over the line."

Trudging in from the woods three hours later he snatched up a telegram from Wilson:

> Found suspect skulking in bush unarmed stop Searched box-car and found loaded automatic tied in gunnysack stop Man refuses to talk but resembles bandit Auloff stop Bringing him to Bellevue for identification.

Swift rejoicing swept the Pass as word leaked out that Auloff had been captured. But Nick's elation evaporated when two uniformed Provincials dragged their frowsy prisoner before him. Though a Russian with a mop of dirty yellow hair, he lacked the bold, predatory features of Auloff.

As a weeping dawn broke over the rain-misted peaks the stillness of the valley was rent by a single shot which seemed to come from the vicinity of the Halloway ranch. Yet not a single man reported firing his gun. Then the rumour spread that Bassoff had committed suicide. Famished, despairing of escaping, and in agony from his wound he had ended his troubles with a bullet through his brain.

That Auloff was still very much alive was evidenced by reports that came rolling in. The elusive Cossack seemed to have multiplied himself a score of times, and acquired the faculty for being at three or four widely separated points at one and the same time. From a dozen places fugitive Russians were reported.

A search of the spot where Gregory had been held up revealed well-defined tracks, evidently made since the last rain. Old Baptiste scrutinized them closely. "Looks lak 'nother man he's foller heem," Baptiste turned to Detective Egan. "Mebbe dat Bassoff he's got troo you guys after all." The crushed grass looked as

though the one man had been dragging the other.

Spreading his men, Egan proceeded to comb the spruce-dotted sidehills. Beneath a culvert a piece of cloth fluttered lazily in the breeze. Brushing through the thickets he emitted a stifled exclamation. Half-buried amongst the wet willows lay the mackinaw-clad body of a burly man with a bullet hole between his shoulders, his face so mutilated as to be unrecognizable.

"Auloff!" Egan glanced significantly at the officer beside him. "Slipped it over on his Cossack pals, but they sure seem to have evened up the score."

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It was the fifth night of the search yet, despite the efforts of three hundred possemen and the police of three forces, Bassoff still remained at large. It was hinted that the report of his suicide had been deliberately circulated by local foreigners to mislead searchers while Bassoff was spirited awayby friends to a place of safety where he could be hidden till his wounds healed.

To the handful of police officers Nick had posted at the little siding of Lundbreck came the distant scream of the west-bound train. Looking to their side arms Constables Sawyer of Calgary, Hallworth of Medicine Hat and Glover of Edmonton prepared to search the on-coming freight cars. Around the rock-cut flashed the white beam of the locomotive's headlight. Nervously Sawyer caught at Tower's arm. Engineer Hammond seemed to be taking delight in sending the mournful wail of the whistle echoing and reverberating in weird cadence above the rhythm of tumbling cascades. The usual signal was followed by the weirdest symphony of sound that ever arose from a lumbering locomotive.

With hissing pistons and clanking wheels the locomotive

roared to the platform. In the orange glow of the Agent's lantern the engineer's oil-smeared face seemed pale. "I've seen him!" he shouted hoarsely.

"Who?" rasped Glover.

"The murderer," came Hammond's swift reply. "If it ain't the bandit I'm a Dutchman. Couldn't beat it fast enough when the headlight picked him out at Pincher..."

Dashing to the office telephone he called Nicholson. A quick-fire conversation followed. "Says to uncouple the engine and hit back to Pincher with you fellows."

Leaping into the cab, Hammond uncoupled, reversed the engine and roared back. In a moment police piled aboard the tender and the engine was swaying through the night.

With clanking wheels and hissing pistons the mountain mogul lurched around hairpin turns that dropped sheer to the black void below, urged to swifter pace as the coal-blackened fireman heaved shovel after shovel of fuel into the scarlet maw of the furnace. At last the green lights of Pincher yard limits shot past.

"Look! there he is."

Strangely magnified in the white beam, an ape-like figure had risen from the ties and, with shambling gait, was making for the storage shed beside the track. As the engine screeched to a halt Hammond grabbed a Winchester and leapt to the track, followed by the dark forms of the police.

"He's there.. in the door!" came Hallworth's strained voice.

Slinking forward from bush to bush the police saw a huge figure crouching in the doorway. Caught in a torchlight beam he blinked a lone eye from a fringe of matted hair and slunk inside.

"Hell," shouted someone, "that's not the bird we're after."

With drawn guns they rushed the door. "Hands up!" commanded Tower.

From within came animal-like sounds.

"Rush him!" shouted Glover.

Charging through the opened door their torches flashed on a huge huddled figure in fur cap and mackinaw crouching with one arm behind him in a corner.

"Look out," warned Tower, "he's reaching for his gun!"

But the large, ape-like figure only glowered stupidly at them from his single, blood-shot eye.

"My God," laughed Glover nervously, "he's got his hand in a biscuit box."

As handcuffs snapped about his wrists, and Glover snatched a wicked Mauser from his shoulder holster, the captive uttered a bellow of fury. Swiftly police relieved him of a roll containing eighty dollars, a glass eye and some dirty papers. "Here's a passport and exemption papers," exclaimed Tower, "and they bear the name of Tom Bassoff!"

Disarmed, dirty and famished; suffering intense pain from his swollen leg infected from a gun wound in the Bellevue battle, the Cossack shuffled between his guards to the waiting room at Pincher station where he sank into a seat, his bloodshot eye unable to meet the hostile gaze of those about him.

"I saw that man roaming the streets this evening," exclaimed Alex Alexander, the storekeeper. "He bought some biscuits in my shop and beat it as the train came in."

Relief over the bloodless capture gave way to amazement at Bassoff's hardihood in struggling forty miles through mountaineous terrain, handicapped with one leg so badly smashed as to necessitate him limping every foot of the way with an improvised crutch. Not only had he worked his way through the police cordon but, had it not been for Hammond's vigilance, he would have reached sympathetic countrymen at Macleod, less than thirty miles away, and probably have escaped.

Lodged behind the bars at Lethbridge Jail the one-eyed bandit repulsed all efforts to get his story, but admitted with a grim chuckle that police had frequently been so close to his hiding place they could have stepped right on him. To wardens he admitted meeting an old man and giving him five dollars for his fur coat and cap, and of taking out his glass eye and putting it in his pocket as a further disguise. Ravenous with hunger he'd entered Alexander's store. Knowing his wounded leg would be a give-away he'd tucked his crutch under his arm and managed to walkwithout it, suffering excruciating agony.

Three days before Christmas Tom Bassoff, unregenerate and defiant, mounted the scaffold in the snow-swept courtyard and, with a snarl on his lips, went to meet his Maker.

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With Bassoff's execution Police congratulated themselves that the case of the three Mad Cossacks was ended. Ackroff had died, riddled with bullets in the Bellevue battle; Auloff had been found killed by his fellow bandit in the culvert, and Bassoff had paid the price the law demanded. But J. D. Nicholson remained unconvinced. Certain that Auloff was still at large he exchanged his uniform for civvies, and following the trail of a letter addressed to the

dead Bassoff from Kersey, Oregon, headed in that direction.

Combing the road camps near Kersey he ran his eye over the payroll and started as the name "Nick Bassoff" leapt from the page. "Where will I find this bird?" he asked the time-keeper.

"Quit two days ago," came the disappointing reply. "Left with another Russian for Seattle."

Still convinced that Auloff had made his getaway, and that the body Egan had found in the Crow's Nest was that of some victim of Emperor Pic's bootleg gang, Nick headed for Seattle, and enlisted the aid of city detectives only to find himself thwarted. Contacting police at Portland, Seattle and other Pacific coast cities he left the make and number of the .23 jewelled Elgin watch stolen from Conductor Jones during the hold-up of Train 63.

Three years later Nick received a wire from the Chief of Police at Portland, informing him that the watch stolen from Jones had turned up in a local pawnshop.

"Get down to Portland right away," Nick ordered Detective Schoeppe. "And don't come back without Auloff."

With a shrug the detective departed; found that the watch had been pawned in Portland by Ali Hassan, and finally confronted the Mohommaden. "Where did you get this?" he demanded coldly.

"Down in Butte," Ali's teeth chattered. "I bought it from a miner."

With Ali beside him, Schoeppe headed for Butte, and when the miners assembled at the commissary they scrutinized their faces. "That's him," Hassan jerked the detective's arm. "Right over there!"

A heavy-shouldered foreigner was buying tobacco from the clerk. Disgustedly the detective noted that he bore no resemblance

to the wanted Auloff.

"Who's that?" he asked the clerk.

"Harry Tomab," came the reply.

"Tell him there's registered letter for him at the office," the detective ordered. "I'll wait for him over there."

When Harry Tomab came seeking his letter he swore that he'd never seen the Crow's Nest Pass, or Alberta, in his life. He had just come down from Valdez, Alaska, and had bought the watch from another miner for five dollars.

Back at Lethbridge Nick's hopes were shattered when he received Schoeppe's telegram. But they mounted when Schoeppe brought in his prisoner. For the moment Brakeman Hickie clapped eyes on him he emitted a roar of anger and jabbed an accusing finger in "Harry Tomab's" face. "That's him," he swore, "that's the blighter who stuck his Mauser in my face and stole my pocket-book. I'd know him anywhere."

Conductor Sam Jones completed the identification.

"Tomab", realizing the jig was up, admitted with a hard-faced grin that Nick was right, that he was Ausby Auloff.

Charged with train robbery, he was sentenced to seven years hard labour, a sentence he was never destined to finish, as he died a few years later in Prince Albert Penitentiary.

Thanks to J. D's., persistence the last of the Three Mad Cossacks had been accounted for.